

FRENCH'S ACTING EDITION

LAUGHTER IN COURT

(CAPTAIN JOHN KENDALL)

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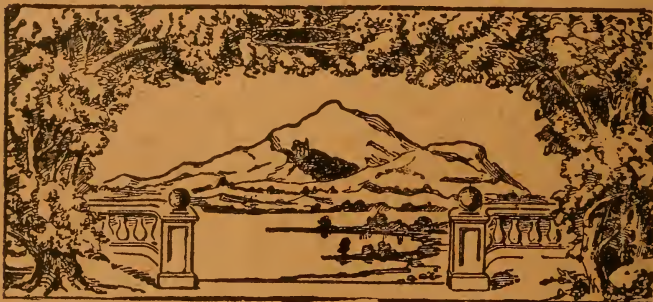
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LAUGHTER IN COURT

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A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

By
CAPTAIN JOHN KENDALL

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CHARACTERS

HIS WORSHIP.

HIS GUEST.

HIS VISITOR.

HIS MANSERVANT.

Produced at Drury Lane, May 11, 1909.

CAST

HIS WORSHIP	<i>Mr. Cyril Maude</i>
HIS GUEST.	<i>Mr. A. Holmes-Gore.</i>
HIS VISITOR	<i>Mr. Gerald Du Maurier.</i>
HIS MANSERVANT	<i>Mr. John Harwood.</i>

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LAUGHTER IN COURT

SCENE.—*His Worship's residence, on the edge of a retired common in the neighbourhood of London. The season is Spring, the hour about ten o'clock at night.*

An extremely comfortable apartment, part drawing-room, part library and study, obviously the "den" of a bachelor of sound ideas and good income. Among other furniture are a piano, a side table laden with creature comforts of a liquid nature. Several portraits of His Worship decorate the walls.

On the rise of the curtain is discovered HIS GUEST. He is sitting in the room alone. On his knees is a large book labelled "CUTTINGS," which he reads with considerable irritation, a state of mind which he endeavours to conceal on the entrance of HIS WORSHIP.

HIS WORSHIP is a little man, of an intense vanity. He has a way of peering furtively at whom he is addressing whenever he thinks he has been delivered of something facetious. He comes in briskly, and giggles when he sees how his GUEST is apparently occupied.

HIS WORSHIP. Excuse my leaving you, my dear boy. Been looking round. Ah, having a look at my book of records, eh? You'll find some amusing cases there.

HIS GUEST. Seem to be *all* amusing!

HIS W. (*deprecatingly*). Oh, come, come——

HIS G. Every blessed page—"Laughter"—
"Roars of Laughter"—"Loud Laughter in which
the prisoner joined."

HIS W. Yes, poor dear fellows. Most painful thing to see what capital fellows are brought up before me. Make your heart bleed. However, it's the blessed privilege of a magistrate that, if he chooses, he can always temper justice with mercy

HIS G. And humour, apparently. Why, since I've been abroad, you've become quite a public jester. There must be hundreds of cases reported here.

HIS W. (*chuckling*). Oh, really! But I must say the Press have been very kind!

HIS G. (*astonished at his way of putting it*). Eh?

HIS W. (*with pride*). Most days they have something in about me.

HIS G. Yes, I see. With headlines. (*Reading.*)
"Humour on the Bench."

HIS W. Well, I suppose they're glad of something to brighten up their columns. Helps 'em to sell, no doubt.

HIS G. Mm—ye—es. (*Changing his manner.*)
I say, what do *they* think about it all?

HIS W. They! Who?

HIS G. Why, the what-d'you-call-'ems—the johnnies who've got their business before you—defendants, prosecutors, and all that. Don't they ever cap you?

HIS W. Cap me? You mean—make jokes?
(*He is horror-stricken.*) My dear fellow, a Court of Law's not a theatre for the bandying of humorous dialogue. Certainly not.

HIS G. What if they did?

HIS W. (*huffily*). I think I know how to preserve my dignity.

HIS G. Well, take another point. It's a serious

business for them. Don't they ever object to the "laughter" stop being on—especially those at whose expense it is?

HIS W. No one's made any objection yet. If he did, it would be a grave case of Contempt.

HIS G. (*dryly*). Yes, I can imagine that.

HIS W. As a matter of fact, generally both sides laugh.

HIS G. Well, no doubt they're sound.

HIS W. Of course, now and then—well, the other day there was an infernal poet——

HIS G. Oh, I read about him. The fellow with the gramophone people. You know, I think he was rather hardly used.

HIS W. Serve him right. A dull dog. An ill-conditioned, cantankerous chap.

HIS G. (*who has turned up the report*). I see it was one of your brightest cases. Didn't he laugh?

HIS W. (*scornfully*). Laugh! Might have been at his own funeral.

HIS G. Well, he lost his case.

HIS W. Serve him right. (*Pulling himself up.*) I mean, he hadn't got a leg to stand on.

(*Enter the MANSERVANT.*)

MANSERVANT. The cab is here, sir.

(HIS GUEST *puts down the book.*)

HIS G. Thanks. Well, I must go.

HIS W. Oh, you're early. (*To MANSERVANT.*) Er—no signs to-night, I suppose. (*Nervously.*)

MANS. None, sir. It's getting past his usual hour now, sir.

(*Exit MANSERVANT.*)

HIS W. Thank goodness. (*He busies himself*

with a drink for his GUEST.) I hope I'm going to be left in peace this evening.

HIS G. Aren't you always? I should have thought this was the very corner in the whole of England where you would be quiet. Listen. As calm as a broken-down motor-bus.

HIS W. Yes. That's why I chose it. Till a week ago it *was* quiet. (*Bitterly.*) Look here. My only hour in the day is after dinner, when I can settle down to a little music, or a book and a cigar. But for the last week I've been trying to read one of the most delightful books of humorous verse I've ever come across, (*Takes it from reading-desk*) and as soon as I begin, an infernal ruffian comes on the common just outside, and starts blowing away at a damned cornet till I'm almost mad. (*Excitedly.*) What am I to do? What am I to do?

HIS G. Run him in.

HIS W. I can't. The beggar's on the common, on the common, you see.

HIS G. What's the odds? Bluff him. He won't know the law. I suppose you've sent out.

HIS W. Yes.

HIS G. Well, if he comes again, have him in. Frighten him. Tell him you're a Beak. Threaten him with the law.

HIS W. But it isn't against the law.

HIS G. What's that got to do with it? Have him in. Give him the Majesty of Law.

HIS W. But he may be a madman.

HIS G. Sure to be. All the better. Any lunatic would be afraid of a Magistrate.

HIS W. (*dubiously.*) You think that's best?

HIS G. I don't see what else you can do.

(MANSERVANT *appears with coat, etc.*)

(*Putting things on.*) Well, good-night, good-night. Had a very jolly evening.

HIS W. Good-night. Come and see me in court.

HIS G. Right. What day?

HIS W. Monday's the best. I have some amusing cases on a Monday. He, he! You ought to have been there to-day. Capital case. Retired prize-fighter applied for protection against his wife.

HIS G. Was she a large woman?

HIS W. (*pettishly*). No, damn it, small. That's the joke. (*Taking an evening paper.*) Here, read it in the train. You'll find it—te—he—under the headline "A Merry Magistrate."

HIS G. (*who doesn't want it*). Don't you want it for your book?

HIS W. No, I have a newscutting Agency. You take that. Good-night.

(*Exit MANSERVANT and GUEST.*)

HIS G. (*putting in his head.*) I say, go slow with that cornet man. He may be a journalist trying to get in for an interview. Up to anything, those chaps.

(*Exit GUEST.*)

(*Left to himself, HIS WORSHIP rings the bell, goes to his chair, swings round his reading desk, opens his book, and becomes the picture of comfort.*)

(*Enter the MANSERVANT.*)

HIS W. If that infernal scoundrel comes to-night, tell him I won't have it.

MANS. Yes, sir. Suppose——

HIS W. If he doesn't go, I shall—er—take steps.

MANS. Very good, sir.

(*Exit MANSERVANT.*)

(*For a moment HIS WORSHIP reads with much enjoyment. After a pause, just as he is filled with an*

exquisite appreciation of some jest, there comes from the darkness without the ghastly, nerve-shattering, cracked wail of a cornet in pain. His frame becomes rigid, his legs return to earth. He groans. The sound is repeated. It is followed by others, each worse than that before. HIS WORSHIP tries to remain deaf to them. Suddenly he puts down his book, springs to his feet, and rushes to the bell.)

(Enter the MANSERVANT.)

(HIS WORSHIP cannot speak. He waves his hand wildly in the direction of the torment.)

MANS. *(in an injured voice)*. I have told him, sir.

HIS W. What did he say?

MANS. Said he was learning the cornet.

(A blast.)

HIS W. Learning the—ough! Did you tell him I wouldn't have it?

MANS. Yes, sir.

HIS W. Well?

MANS. He said, wasn't it a nice moon.

HIS W. *(with conviction)*. He is mad. Then he is mad.

MANS. I'm afraid you'll have to see him yourself, sir.

(A blast.)

HIS W. Ough! I will, I will. Tell him to come in. Wait. D'you think he's a journalist?

MANS. *(austerely)*. No, sir, he looks like a gentleman.

(A blast.)

HIS W. I can't stand it. Fetch him at once. And, look here, make him leave that infernal thing outside, and then steal it.

MANS. Very well, sir.

(Exit MANSERVANT.)

(The noise suddenly breaks off. HIS WORSHIP is at the glass conjuring up a stern expression of countenance. Enter the MANSERVANT.)

The—er—gentleman, sir. (*Sotto voce*.) It's in his bag, sir.

(Enter the VISITOR.)

(To HIS WORSHIP'S surprise, he is plainly a gentleman. He is nice looking, and of a debonnair and athletic habit. He is carrying a bag. He appears to think that he is invited in as a matter of courtesy, and advances upon his host with easy and insouciant affability.)

HIS VISITOR. Very kind of you, my dear sir, very hospitable. (*Joyously*.) Ah, I see what it is. (*He waves his hand towards the piano.*)

HIS W. (*choking with rage*). What d'ye mean?

HIS V. A piano! You're going to offer to play my accompaniments—but I'm only in exercises so far.

HIS W. Nonsense, sir. I want to know what the devil——

HIS V. Naughty, naughty!

HIS W. Bah! What you mean by——

HIS V. What, before a third party?

HIS W. Never mind the third party.

HIS V. Oh, but I do mind. (*To MANSERVANT affably.*) No objection to your personal appearance, you know.

MANS. He, he! He, he!

HIS W. (*observing his ribaldry with disfavour*). Go away! Be at hand if I ring. Here! Take the—er—gentleman's bag.

HIS V. (*clutching it warily*). No, you don't. Mustn't part an artist from his instrument. Why, it's my bedfellow.

HIS W. All right. You can go.

(*Exit MANSERVANT on the broad grin.*)

Now, sir, perhaps you'll explain yourself.

HIS V. (*who has caught sight of the drinks—ingratiatingly*). There's one drawback to a cornet as a musical instrument—makes one so thirsty.

HIS W. (*refusing the hint*). Did you hear me speak?

HIS V. Er—you don't play the cornet, I suppose?

HIS W. No, I don't.

(*HIS VISITOR gives up an idea of a drink—for the present.*)

Will you kindly tell me what you mean by coming outside my house, and making yourself a nuisance—a nuisance to me, sir—to *me*?

HIS V. (*vaguely*). Oh, Art, Art!

HIS W. Confound it, sir, do you know who you're speaking to?

HIS V. Name of Smith, by any chance?

HIS W. Smi—Smi—I'd have you know that I'm a magistrate, a stipendiary magistrate.

HIS V. And a jolly good billet, I believe.

HIS W. And I've sent for you to tell you that I won't have it.

HIS V. (*mildly*). How do you propose to stop it?

HIS W. That's my affair. It wasn't to be badgered in this way that I came to live on the edge of a quiet common——

HIS V. (*quickly*). Common!

HIS W. Eh?

HIS V. My dear sir, any one can play the cornet on a common. Don't you try and interfere with the Public's rights. I'm the Public.

HIS W. Don't you try to teach me law, sir. I don't want to be taught law by any noisy stranger——

HIS V. Oh, but we're not strangers!

(HIS WORSHIP *starts.*)

Doesn't your Worship recognize me? Can I have faded from its memory so soon?

HIS W. (*feebly*). It's the Poet!

HIS V. (*angrily*). Now then, none of that. Don't you call me a poet.

HIS W. That's how your solicitor described you.

HIS V. Yes, the fool. I told him not to. I knew you'd only try and be funny. (*With great scorn.*) You clown! That's what I've come to talk about.

HIS W. You'll do nothing of the kind. This is my house. Please leave it.

HIS V. Why, you've just asked me in. Cornet and all! (*Arming himself with it.*) I owe the cornet to you, by the way. (*He puts it to his lips.*)

HIS W. Stop that, sir. Are you going, or shall I ring the bell for the police?

HIS V. Neither, little man, neither. Sit down. Away from the bell. You shall ring as much as you like in a few minutes. (*He presses him gently but firmly into a chair.*)

(HIS WORSHIP *seems to be cowed, and keeps a nervous eye on the instrument.*)

You're not crowing on your own little dunghill now, you know. That's better. I'll sit here between you and the bell. And now to refresh your memory. A short time ago, a gentleman, of agreeable manners and prepossessing exterior,—me!—whom his fool of a solicitor described as a poet, applied to you for protection against his neighbours, who made his life hideous with a damned gramophone which they

ground at half the night. When he asked them to draw it mild, they went on two hours longer. That's all the change *he* got. So he ran the brutes in, and blest, if he didn't find that, in the beak's point of view, there was no law against making a deliberate nuisance of yourself to your neighbours. (*Smacking his lips.*) So here I am!

HIS W. There was no evidence that it was deliberate.

HIS V. (*warming at his wrongs.*) Evidence, you little ass!

(HIS WORSHIP *jumps. Up goes the cornet to HIS VISITOR'S lips. HIS WORSHIP subsides.*)

It was obvious, from the very fact, to any one but a born idiot. You were too busy playing the buffoon to listen.

HIS W. Buffoon, sir, buf—— (*Up goes the cornet.*)

HIS V. Yes, buffoon! All I got was a suggestion that I should retaliate by learning the cornet. And here it is! (*He smiles on HIS WORSHIP.*)

HIS W. That remark about the cornet was merely intended to be jocular.

HIS V. Jocular! Ye gods! Who the devil put you there to be jocular? You're there for the law.

HIS W. Well, if anything funny——

HIS V. Funny, you little byword! My objection to the way you go on is that it isn't funny!

HIS W. Not funny! This is an outrage!

HIS V. Your whole conduct on the bench is an outrage!

(*They are both on their feet, glaring. Up comes the cornet. An appalling wail comes forth.*)

HIS W. Don't! Don't! (*Writhing in his chair.*)

HIS V. Then be quiet, and behave yourself.

Mere twopenny-halfpenny buffoonery **that** wouldn't be stood in a second-class Pub. (*Looking by chance at the book.*) Why, I'm hanged if he doesn't collect his crimes! Conceited little idiot! Here, I won't condemn you unheard. Where am I in the Chamber of Horrors? Here we are! The evidence was that the damned gramophone went on to all hours grinding out vulgar music-hall songs and worse band selections. Very well. You said, perhaps I didn't like music. Laughter. No doubt the performers did. Laughter. In amateur music the performers generally liked it better than the audience. Laughter. (*Looking at him inquiringly.*) Well, is that funny?

HIS W. I didn't say it for fun.

HIS V. Then why did you say it?

(*He has him there. HIS WORSHIP sits digesting the matter.*)

HIS V. Well, then my fool of a solicitor called me a poet. That was your chance. (*Reading.*) "His Worship"—with a sly glance; poet, indeed? I'm not familiar with his name." They roared at that, didn't they?

HIS W. (*savagely*). You didn't.

HIS V. No, and I lost my case!

HIS W. (*starting up again*). You insinuate, sir——

(*The cornet is raised. He collapses.*)

HIS V. It was beastly rude. However, we now come to a real gem: music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. Well, dash it, is *that* funny?

HIS W. (*sourly*). Not as you say it.

HIS V. Then say it yourself! Show me the funny way of saying it! Go on!

HIS W. You have the advantage of me here. If I only had you in Court!

HIS V. You'd have the advantage of me there!

Yes, and you'd presume on it ! Then we come to a jocular piece of advice that I should change my address. Well ? (*Inquiringly.*) I ought to have a sense of humour by now, but I'm dashed if I can see yours.

HIS W. At your own expense.

HIS V. My own ex——The cheek of the little brat ! What right have you got to try and be funny at any one's expense ? But, I say, do you really think you're funny ? Why, your remarks aren't as funny as my cornet ; that does at any rate teem with the unexpected ; it's not obvious. But it isn't only me. Why, here's a whole bookful of this tosh—you're always at it.

HIS W. That's no business of yours.

HIS V. Yes, it is. I'm the Public—I've told you that once. Do you know that in court you represent His Majesty ? And do you think I like to see the King's representative making himself publicly contemptible ?

HIS W. Contemptible ?

HIS V. Yes, begad. And contempt of court's an offence. You oughtn't to incite people to it.

HIS W. Look here, sir, you lost your case. You had my advice. Now go.

HIS V. Who the deuce asked for your advice ? However, I'm taking it. I'm changing my address. Into this neighbourhood.

HIS W. (*despairingly*). Here ?

HIS V. Yes. And I'm learning the cornet—at least, I'm trying. (*Raising it.*)

HIS W. Put that weapon down, sir, or I'll scream ! Do you solemnly suggest that you're coming here outside my window—always ?

HIS V. Pretty well. Bar Sundays. All the summer before me.

HIS W. (*gasping*). I'll prosecute you.

HIS V. Can't. Your own precedent, you know. There's only one thing for it, so far as I can see.

HIS W. Eh?

HIS V. Change your address, or learn the trombone. Roars of laughter.

HIS W. Gurrh! *(Struck with an idea.)* No, but I tell you what. If I have too much, I'll have you charged for loitering about as a suspicious character. By gad, I will!

HIS V. *(in high glee.)* What? What a thing it is to have a legal mind! I say, can you really run me in?

HIS W. Yes, I can.

HIS V. And *will* you?

HIS W. Yes, I will.

HIS V. *(with decision.)* Good. I'll come every night.

HIS W. Hey?

HIS V. Rather. Why, that's just what I want. I say, is Gillson, K.C., a friend of yours?

HIS W. No!

HIS V. Thought not, from the way he speaks of you. Holy terror to cross-examine, isn't he?

HIS W. What's that got to do with it?

HIS V. Why, he *is* a pal of mine. You run me in, and he's promised to appear for me. Lord, we'll have it all out! All this interview—everything I've said and done—and *(sotto voce)* everything I'm going to do! You shall be cross-examined by Gillson! Talk about laughter in Court!

HIS W. *(utterly prostrate.)* Gillson! *(Under his breath.)* My gum!

HIS V. Yes, good old Gillson! He *is* a wag, that chap! You'll be the laughing stock of the whole Press! *(Solemnly.)* Little man, he'll make you smell hell! *(Taking up his cornet.)* Shall we begin?

HIS W. Gillson! *(Feebly.)* Glad if you'd go now! Let the case be adjourned! Glad if you'd go!

HIS V. Wouldn't you like a little music? *(Sees how broken he is.)* All right, I won't rub it in.

(*He goes for his bag. This he has left so that, in getting it, his eye falls on the drinks. He stands a moment, half in doubt, with one hand on the bag, gazing on the refreshments.*)

HIS W. (*not looking up*). I've nothing more to-night. Nothing more.

HIS V. No, but I have.

(*It is plain that this last act of his is caused by a recollection of the drink that was not offered in response to his early hint.*)

Catch hold of this, will you?

(*"This" is a large horse-collar, which he produces from his bag.*)

HIS W. (*not looking up*). What's that?

HIS V. Only a horse-collar. I want to see you grin through it.

HIS W. (*roused by this last insult*). A horse-collar! Confound you, sir, this is too much! Go at once!

HIS V. Yes, if you'll just—— (*Offering it.*)

HIS W. I'll do nothing of the kind. You've gone too far.

HIS V. But just——

HIS W. Look here, I've been very forbearing to you, very forbearing—but—are you going?

HIS V. Yes, if——

HIS W. Very well. (*He jumps out of his chair.*)

HIS V. Now look here, little man, you've got to do it. Here, catch hold of it. Smile! Grin! Try and look funny!

(*He advances with the collar. HIS WORSHIP dodges him round the table, dashes to the bell, and rings violently.*)

HIS W. Now go, before the servants come.

(HIS VISITOR *follows quickly, gets behind, and crams the collar down over his head.*)

HIS V. Let them all come ! More witnesses for Gillson ! Roars of laughter.

(HIS WORSHIP *collapses utterly.*)

HIS W. No, no. Take it off.

(HIS VISITOR *holds it on.*)

Lock the door !

HIS V. Shan't !

HIS W. Take it off—they're coming—I give in !

HIS V. Honour bright ?

HIS W. Yes, quick ! What shall I say ?

HIS V. (*cruelly*). Something funny !

HIS W. No, no ! What ?

HIS V. (*whips the collar away and holds it behind his back*). Tell 'em to get me a cab.

(*The MANSERVANT enters.*)

MANS. Did you ring, sir ?

HIS W. A cwab for this gentleman, kick ! I mean—Cab—quick !

(*Exit the MANSERVANT.*)

HIS V. I say, you cut it rather fine !

HIS W. (*breathing heavily*). You might have spared me that last indignity.

HIS V. Why, I did ! You've got no gratitude ! Here have I been carrying the thing about for a week, and—(*He sees that HIS WORSHIP is broken*) all right. We'll say no more.

HIS W. (*humbly*). I thank you. I thank you.

HIS V. Not at all, not at all. But really, you know, all this Laughter in Court rot, don't you think you'd better drop it ? It's so beastly undig-

nified. Look here, what do your brother beaks think of it all? If it were funny, it would be bad enough. But, dash it, it can't be funny. Humour requires a discriminating audience. But you're top dog. Everyone's got to laugh somehow. They know that. Besides, it isn't fair. No one can answer back. And I'll take my oath it doesn't improve your decisions.

(HIS WORSHIP *has received this lecture without moving. He now speaks with some difficulty.*)

HIS W. Perhaps we needn't go into that. But I confess that my sympathies were possibly wrongly directed in your case. But—before the cab comes—I hope you won't find it necessary to come every evening as you threatened.

HIS V. Well, *I* had to stand it every evening.

HIS W. But I appeal to you——

HIS V. I appealed to them. They went on all the longer.

HIS W. But you didn't think it kind. But listen. (*With great pathos.*) Are you a bachelor?

HIS V. Yes, thank Heaven!

HIS V. So am I, and consequently fond of my home. I'm busy all day. My evenings are my only time for relaxation. As a bachelor, you will understand that I am fond also of a pipe and a book in solemn quiet. (*He waxes eloquent with his sorrows.*) Sir, for the last week my pleasures—my innocent pleasures—have been destroyed. No sooner have I sat down than your infernal—I should say, your arrival—has effectually banished peace from my humble roof just as I was tackling one of the most delightful books I've ever hungered for. (*He holds up the book.*) Come, sir, don't you think we've had enough? (*Plaintively.*) Don't rub it in!

HIS V. (*thunderstruck*): That the book? Well, I'm damned!

HIS W. Yes. "Blots—by A. J. Penn." You know it?

HIS V. (*coyly giggling*). He, he!

(HIS WORSHIP *looks up in surprise, and is amazed to see his opponent's countenance betraying all the shy acknowledgments of Authorship.*)

HIS W. My dear sir, are you unwell? But—that countenance—that smile—good gracious! Can you really be the author of this? The very man whom I've been longing to meet? But your name was not given in Court as Penn.

HIS V. (*giggling*). Hardly publish verse under my own name. I have some self-respect. That (*very coyly*) that's my Penn-name.

(HIS WORSHIP *leaps up and waxes enthusiastically hospitable.*)

HIS W. My dear sir, say no more! This is indeed an honour. But—what? Not a poet! (*He wags his finger reproachfully.*)

HIS V. I may be a writer of light verse—but I'll take my oath I'm no poet.

HIS W. (*archly*). Legal quibble—to a lawyer! But this is most gratifying. (*He fusses about.*) Sit down at once, my dear sir! Try one of these! (*A cigar.*) And say "when"— (*He goes to the drinks.*)

HIS V. This is awfully good of you. Thank you. That's heaps.

HIS W. (*with great empressement*). Most kind of you to look in like this.

HIS V. Not at all. Thanks. (*For the drink.*)

(*Enter the MANSERVANT.*)

MANS. The cab is here, sir.

HIS W. Damn the cab!

(*Exit the MANSERVANT.*)

But what a lesson to me ! I can understand your being annoyed. I blush to think how feeble my poor little amateur remarks must have appeared to you !

HIS V. No, no ! But I must apologise for having made an infernal nuisance of myself. Serves me right for trying to be funny.

HIS W. But I'm delighted you came, sir.

(He raises his glass.)

Your very good health ! But why didn't you tell me who you were ? Oh, if I'd only known, how I would have hotted those ruffians with the gramophone !

HIS V. *(with excitement)*. You mean, I should have won my case ?

HIS W. *(enthusiastically)*. Of course !

HIS V. *(raising his glass)*. Success to Crime !

CURTAIN—on the two amicably hobnobbing.



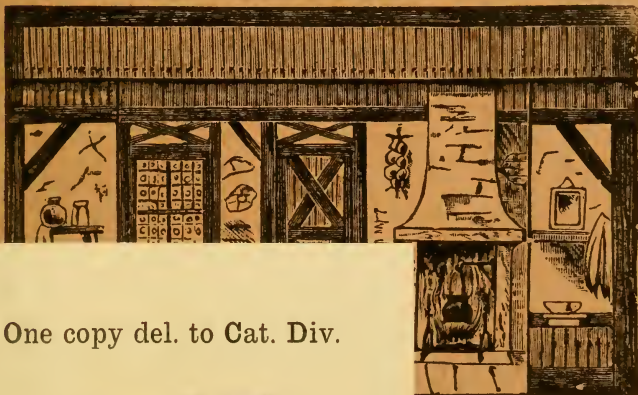
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